

Bat Rabies

What is rabies?

Rabies is an infectious disease caused by a virus that infects nerves in warm-blooded animals. The rabies virus reaches the brain through the nervous system

Eventually it reaches the salivary glands, and can be released into the saliva of the mouth. By this time, the disease has usually affected the brain and caused a change in the behaviour of the animal. It eventually causes death.

Although the animal may be infectious it could be a few days before any clinical signs or symptoms show, but they are still able to transmit the disease.

Are there different types of rabies?

There are different strains of rabies, but unlike flu strains, one vaccine protects against all strains. There are three strains presently in Ontario: 'arctic fox' (predominantly in foxes and skunks), 'mid-Atlantic' raccoon (mainly found in raccoons), and a variety of bat strains.

What is the concern about bat strain rabies?

Although bat rabies is rare, 70% of all human deaths from rabies in North America since 1980 were caused by rabid bats. Bats can bite and a person not even be aware of it or able to see teeth marks.

The most recent human case of rabies occurred when an Alberta man who was bitten by a bat in August 2006 did not receive treatment and then died from

rabies at the end of April 2007. Before that in 2006, a 16 year old boy from Texas died from bat associated rabies.

Bat strain rabies is found throughout Canada and the Americas. At least four strains have been identified in Ontario.

Each of the following bat species has its own strain of rabies:

- ▶ Big Brown Bat – more than 95% of all confirmed rabid bats in Ontario
- ▶ Silver-haired Bat – evidence suggests this strain is the most likely to infect humans
- ▶ Red Bat
- ▶ Hoary Bat

Several smaller bat species in Ontario, such as the little brown, the pipistrelle and others, do not have their own rabies strains. The big brown bat strain is very occasionally found in these smaller bats.

What should I do if I'm bitten by a bat?

- Immediately wash the wound well with soap and water
- Consult a physician
- Notify the local health unit

What should I do if I see a bat outside?

If a bat is wandering in daylight or crawling on the ground, it may be rabid, stay away. If you see bats outside, leave them alone. Bats are an important part of our natural environment.

What if I find a bat (dead or alive) in the house?

Contact your local public health unit if you find a bat in your house. If the bat is dead, contact your local office of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency found under Agriculture Canada in the blue pages of your telephone book.

Why does the bat need to be tested?

Only testing can determine whether or not the bat is carrying rabies. When a physician does not know this information, they may recommend rabies post-exposure treatment in accordance with Ministry of Health and Long Term Care guidelines.

Where can I get more information?

For more information call Your Health Connection at 721-7520 (1-877-721-7520) Monday to Friday or visit the following websites:

Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit
www.simcoemuskokahealth.org

Ministry of Natural Resources
www.mnr.gov.on.ca

Ministry of Health and Long Term Care
www.health.gov.on.ca